

Transformative Ecumenism in a Pandemic-Stricken World

Jooseop Keum

Rebellion of Bats

Bats are angry because they have lost their homes. Their dark and damp but safe homes are destroyed by the mammal who walks with two legs only. It is horrific because some of them believe that bats taste yummy. Bats have started to protect themselves by spreading out zoonotic pathogens. The Covid-19 pandemic is neither a natural nor accidental disaster. It is a human-made *ecological disaster* due to the genocide of eco-diversity and human invasion of the homes of wild animals. Prof Jae Chun Choe, a renowned evolutionary biologist claims that we need to develop not only a medical vaccine but also an “ecological vaccine.”¹ Social distance is not enough, but ecological distance allowing the resilience of creation is imperative. Eco-diversity is the foundation of natural beauty and life of all creatures. I have raised a question in the WCC Mission Statement, *Together towards Life* (TTL) as follows:

God did not send the Son for the salvation of humanity alone or give us a partial salvation. Rather the gospel is the good news for every part of creation and every aspect of our life and society. It is, therefore, vital to recognize God’s mission in a cosmic sense, and to affirm all life, the whole *oikoumene*, as being interconnected in God’s web of life. As threats to the future of our planet are evident, what are their implications for our participation in God’s mission?²

It is also a *socio-economic disaster* due to the neo-liberal globalisation. The Covid-19 has been found in a single species of bat (*Rhinolophus affinis*) in China. An epidemic broken out in a local market in Wuhan, China has become a global pandemic within a month and locked down most of the sectors of society, business, education, culture, art, sports, religion and so on. Obviously, the spread of the virus was contributed by the globalisation. The number of deaths was sharply increased in those countries where there was radical cut of medical budget and subsequent restructuring of health care system due to their neo-liberal policies.

Politics is not an exception. The rise of populist ultra-right-wing regimes - even fascist - everywhere is a *political disaster*. Mr Dan Patrick, deputy governor of Texas said, “Old people should volunteer to die to save the economy.”³ Although he is not that young, those people who have money and power may believe in the hierarchy of life and immortality of privilege. It is not a secret that when the number of tested positive became irresistible, the French government discouraged those patients over 70 in the priority for medical treatment. I have challenged in TTL the law of “survival of the fittest”:

We are living in a world in which faith in mammon threatens the credibility of the gospel. Market ideology is spreading the propaganda that the global market will save the world through unlimited growth. This myth is a threat not only to economic life but also to the spiritual life of people, and not only to humanity but also to the whole creation. How can we proclaim the good news and values of God’s kingdom in the global market, or win over the spirit of the market? What kind of missional action can the church take in the midst of economic and ecological injustice and crisis on a global scale?⁴

¹ Jae Chun Choe, “The Mission of the Korean Church in the Context of Covid-19 Pandemic,” Korea Society for Ecumenical Studies, 14 May 2020.

² Jooseop Keum ed., *Together towards Life: Mission and Evangelism in Changing Landscape*, Geneva, WCC Publications, p.5.

³ <https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2020/03/dan-patrick-coronavirus-grandparents>

⁴ TTL, p.6.

Systemic greed, sharp economic disparities, environmental destruction, war economies, supremacist ideologies, and exploitation of vulnerable people, are some of many that stand out to mirror the extent of its moral decadence. Alongside these, a new awareness that the current trends will only be more detrimental for the future of life of the earth, and a new resolve to search for alternatives, also seem increasingly prominent.

Korea Society for Ecumenical Studies has organised the two series of webinars on “Covid-19 and Christianity” in the Korean and East Asian contexts in May and June. We are organising a global webinar in November with the following questions: Where do churches and Christian organizations find themselves amidst these changes and trends? How does the pandemic challenge their cherished understandings of church, mission, discipleship and worship? What alternative visions and signposts do they have to offer to a world that finds itself at crossroads? How can we re-imagine ecumenism which is transformative in a pandemic-stricken world?

Korean Church and Pandemic

In late February 2020, South Korea faced a catastrophe due to a massive outbreak of Covid-19 among the members of a Christian originated cult known as the *Shincheonji* or New World Church. The country found itself in second place behind China in confirmed cases of infection. Since then, South Korea has implemented several innovative measures that dramatically reduced the number of infections. Extensive testing and effective contact tracing were crucial and free tests and treatments were available in most cases so far. Thanks to aggressive testing and early treatment, the case fatality rate has remained relatively low. As of 14th of August, 14,873 people tested positive and 305 deaths reported. South Korea has treated the Covid-19 without lockdowns, curfews, or immigration controls. Most of the workplaces remained open.

Most of all the Korean churches had been closed all the activities including worship services for 6-8 weeks. Christians are well disciplined to follow the guidelines introduced by the denominational offices in cooperation with the national health care system. Worship, prayers and religious education, even community building went to online. Fortunately, most of churches are equipped for online ministry even before the pandemic. One of the most significant developments in my view was the campaign to worship God even better concentrated ways online through family worship at home. The churches have paid attention to the elderly and vulnerable who have difficulty participating in online services allowing them for offline worship on Saturdays with safe distances. Now, most of churches are introducing the activities both on and off-lines simultaneously. It is roughly half and half between the two ways. However, most Christians are remaining in a closed community for other’s safety. It is still a big question that whether those congregations remaining online will return to the off-line church after Covid-19. Surprisingly, offerings and donations have not yet much reduced. Most of congregation are customised to offer through internet banking. However, people are on the move online for tourism to various traditions of worship, messages and communities.

Receive the Holy Spirit

According to the Gospel of John, the Jewish leaders conspired to kill Jesus for the first time after Jesus had healed the person who had been waiting for 38 years beside the pool of Bethesda. They said, ‘He has broken the Sabbath’ (John 5:1-18). However, the system of Bethesda, which allows the one who can run first to take everything (healing), should be broken. The structure which prohibits the suffering people to take hands and walk together into “the stirring water of life” has to be transformed. The Bethesda, named as “the house of mercy” but which has no mercy at all, has to be demolished even on the day of Sabbath. From there, Jesus Christ builds up the Cross, a new temple, the

community of hope among us. But, this hope is a threat for the privileged who keep their power and money with the doctrine and hierarchy of the Sabbath. So they crucified him.

Following the crucifixion of Jesus, we are told that “the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews” (John 20:19). In today’s world, disciples of Jesus are locked down due to pandemic and many other reasons to be afraid. Division, fundamentalism, violence and discrimination are all on the increase everywhere in the world. In our socio-political cultures, the darker side of human nature is overwhelming. We could easily be tempted to lock the doors, distancing ourselves and concern with self-preservation. The gospel, however, leads in a different direction. Jesus came and stood among the disciples saying: “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me so I send you” (21). Hiding behind locked doors was not their calling. Instead, they were sent on a mission modelled after the mission of Jesus. Finally, he breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit” (22).

For the first time in the church history, most of the churches in the world regardless, of confessions and regions, have not been able to physically assemble to worship in the sanctuaries. The traditional mode of being the Church, participating in God’s mission, acting diakonia and liturgy based on physical presence are dysfunctional in the context of epidemic. Furthermore, people are not expecting any larger contributions to the current challenges by the churches, rather anxious whether religion becomes a centre of spread of the virus. However, people are worshipping online, focusing on spiritual health and the disadvantaged, creating virtual communities of caring and supporting. How is the Church and her mission going to be renewed in the Covid-19 world? I have made a point in TTL as follows:

Life in the Holy Spirit is the essence of mission, the core of why we do what we do, and how we live our lives. Spirituality gives deepest meaning to our lives and motivates our actions. It is a sacred gift from the Creator, the energy for affirming and caring for life. This mission spirituality has a dynamic of transformation which, through spiritual commitment of people, is capable of transforming the world in God’s grace.⁵

Mission from the Margins

The incarnation of Jesus took place among the people at the margins. At the time of the birth of Jesus, people who gathered around him were people outside of the power structure. They were people with neither political power nor religious authority: women, children, and the poor people like the shepherds. These people were not allowed to enter the temple. Jesus was not born in a palace, but a manger, a ragged cowshed, an open and unprotected place. The birth of Jesus was astonishing, threatening news for those decision makers. They never expected that God would be revealed among the lowly people. God chose the ‘margin’ – the people on the underside of history – to inaugurate the Reign of God.⁶ Therefore, TTL proposes the concept of “mission from the margins” as a new direction of mission:

Mission from the margins seeks to counteract injustices in life, church, and mission. It seeks to be an alternative missional movement against the perception that mission can only be done by the powerful to the powerless, by the rich to the poor, or by the privileged to the marginalized. Such approaches can contribute to oppression and marginalization... Living on the margins, however, can provide its own lessons. People on the margins have agency, and can often see what, from the centre, is out of view. People on the margins, living in vulnerable positions,

⁵ TTL, p.4.

⁶ Wati Longchar, “Mission from the Margins: Power and Powerless”, Keynote, WCC-CWME Latin American Consultation on “Together towards Life” and the World Mission Conference, 30th April - 04 May, 2017, Rosario, Argentina, p.1.

often know what exclusionary forces are threatening their survival and can best discern the urgency of their struggles; people in positions of privilege have much to learn from the daily struggles of people living in marginal conditions.⁷

Marginalized people have God-given gifts that are under-utilized because of disempowerment, and denial of access to opportunities and/or justice. Through struggles in and for life, marginalized people are reservoirs of the active hope, collective resistance, and perseverance that are needed to remain faithful to the promised reign of God. I believe this is the beginning of the renewal of authentic discipleship. Covid-19 is an opportunity to nurture transformative ecumenism at the level of people and communities beside the pool of Bethesda, not always in the temple of Jerusalem!

Power of Love to Defeat Culture of Hatred

In the context of the rise of pandemic, racism and fascism, one of the key goals of ecumenism should be to reflect on how do we understand and give expression to the “power of God’s love”⁸ to defeat the culture of politics of exclusion and fear. Are we presenting God’s love as good only for another world because some of us do not want to risk losing the benefits and privileges that various forms of structurally embedded injustice bestow on us? If so, are we not limiting the power of God’s love by seeking to witness in ways that are safe and comfortable, limiting it to the realm of the purely personal, granted to or accessed on certain terms and conditions, and limiting it as one that numbs and soothes rather than as one that heals and transforms?

We do not believe that the power of God’s love is inferior to the powers of death, and we affirm that the power of the Risen Lord subjugates the powers of death, even as the rest of the world embraces or remains indifferent to the powers of death in God’s beloved world. How then can we witness to God’s love in ways that our witness nurtures, protects, and enhances life while confronting and transforming the denial of God’s gift of life? Nurturing just relationships is a concrete expression of God’s love in society.

It is time to question the ecumenical movement: ‘Are we true disciples of the gospel?’ It is the quality of discipleship that will prove decisive in the context of Covid-19. Do we believe that the power of love can transform the world of hatred and injustice?

Nurturing Transforming Discipleship

In March 2018 the WCC CWME convened the World Mission Conference, Arusha, Tanzania, to address the theme: “Moving in the Spirit: Called to Transforming Discipleship”.⁹ How we understand the phrase “transforming discipleship” carries three profoundly different and yet closely related meanings.

First, the very idea of discipleship needs to be transformed. Discipleship is often understood in the mere sense of being in a loving, friendly relationship with Jesus. While this is a profound truth, the discipleship that we intend to emphasize is one that is not only a relationship but is actively engaged in continuing Jesus’ mission in the world. To know Jesus is to follow him in what he did. It calls us to witness to Jesus and to the Kingdom that he preached, and, when appropriate, to proclaim Jesus’ name and his gospel as well. It calls us to an evangelism that is done in Christ’s way.

⁷ *TTL*, pp.15-16.

⁸ The theme of the 11th WCC Assembly in 2022 is “Christ’s Love Moves the World to Reconciliation and Unity.”

⁹ See, Risto Jukko, Jooseop Keum eds., *Moving in the Spirit: Report of WCC Conference on World Mission and Evangelism in Arusha, Tanzania in March 2018*, Geneva, WCC Publications, 2019.

Second, we are called to be disciples constantly open to being transformed, individually and communally, in our following of Jesus. Discipleship commits us to embark on a spiritual journey that will constantly challenge us and shape us into people who reflect the Lord Jesus in our actions, words, and attitudes. Discipleship commits us to disciplines of prayer, practices that shape our character and hearts, and to the cultivation of habits that give us strength and courage to live lives of Christian witness.

Third, we are called to be disciples who are ourselves transforming, and as such we are privileged to join in the mission of the Triune God, working together towards life, living out the values of the Kingdom of God, and engaging in mission from the margins. In a world in which injustice seems almost insuperable, where hatred and racism seem to thrive, where the suffering caused by Covid-19 is so widespread and terrifying in a pandemic-stricken world, our discipleship is costly. It calls us to put a theology of the cross into practice. It calls us to spend our energy and even offer our lives for the transformation that the Kingdom promises.

What will it mean for us, as individuals and churches, to be transformed in the power of the Holy Spirit? What will it mean to join the Spirit in transforming and healing a broken world? Dr Deenabandhu Manchala answers:

The call to transforming discipleship, therefore, involves seeking partnerships, forging partnerships and in living out the call to be one with others in God's mission of transformation. One of the distinct ways in which churches have made positive differences in history is when they understood themselves as movements of people... It was their ability to read the signs of the times, and to understand the purpose of their being in those contexts, that made them creative, and life-affirming forces."¹⁰

Future of Ecumenism

A group of younger theologians who gathered together as an International Theological Colloquium for Transformative Ecumenism reflected as follows:

The ecumenical movement is in crisis – a deep crisis painfully felt everywhere. It is a crisis brought by a prophetic bankruptcy in terms of the movement, an intellectual bankruptcy in terms of the ecumenical spirit and vision, and a moral bankruptcy in terms of the leadership. The ecumenical movement is no longer strongly rooted in the people and it does not speak a prophetic voice which echoes in the realities of people's struggles for life. The ecumenical movement no longer produces a new and heart-beating vision for the church and the world that are deeply divided and wounded. The ecumenical leadership has suffered from bureaucratic and business-oriented mindedness that lacks the sense of calling and devotion.¹¹

It is painful to listen to the criticisms of younger theologians. But there is a proverb in Korea, "A good medicine is bitter." *Oikoumene* is a vision that took shape as a movement of churches amidst division and strife in the world, asserting that we, human beings and all living beings on the earth, belong to one household of God. As a response to our Lord's prayer 'that they all may be one' (John 17:11), the goal of Christian unity was seen and pursued as a precursor to the realization of the vision of grand reconciliation of all people and beings in God (Eph.1:10). The purpose and scope of Christian

¹⁰ Deenabandhu Manchala, "Moving in the Spirit: Called to Transforming Discipleship Reflections from the vantage points of the marginalized people," Keynote speech, Commission on World Mission and Evangelism, 13 January 2017, Atlanta, USA, p.10.

¹¹International Theological Colloquium on Transformative Ecumenism, Pocheon, Korea, 2012, <http://www.miraeforum.org/20>

understanding of unity have been constantly evolving, to include the unity of the humankind and the whole of creation. Since we are living in a troubled and broken world and facing internal challenges within the ecumenical movement, we should re-imagine its fresh vision and rejuvenate it.

Transformative Ecumenism as a faith-driven movement towards justice and life requires a shift of location – in hermeneutical as well as in geographical terms: from the board rooms to the streets and from dogma to life. Life and lives matter, therefore Transformative Ecumenism is a calling towards a celebration of life in its fullness with people in the concrete contexts and communities. As a concluding remarks, I would like to suggest the following seven directions for future ecumenism:

- *Status confessionis* on climate change and ecological diversities
- Developing economy of life instead of the worship of mammon
- Re-imagining ecumenism as a movement from the margins beyond institutionalism
- Nurturing a spirituality of the interconnectedness of Life and solidarity of hope
- Exploring theologies of Life and fostering partnerships among the vulnerable
- Shifting the centre of ecumenism from the euro-centric to world Christianity
- Fostering the Ecumenical leadership based on faith values not ecclesial politics.